

**FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET**

**Meeting Date: January 15, 2015**

**Agenda Item: Tendoy Bighorn Sheep Season Structure**

**Division: Wildlife**

**Action Needed: Proposed**

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 15 Minutes**

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**Background:** At the December meeting the Department informed the Commission of the concept of depopulating a struggling population of bighorn sheep to make way for restocking of the same range. Bighorn sheep of the Tendoy Mountains herd in Hunting District 315 have been experiencing very low lamb recruitment since the all-age pneumonia die offs of 1993 and 1997 in spite of augmentations in 1997, 2001 and 2012 that were done in the hopes of speeding up population recovery. A 2012 disease survey identified disease pathogens endemic in this herd. The Tendoy Mountains herd is therefore a suitable candidate for a depopulation and restocking effort. If the Environmental Assessment (EA) for the project is adopted and the decision made to go forward with depopulation and restocking, an aggressive public hunting harvest could begin as early as the fall of 2015. However, there is currently one limited either-sex license offered through the drawing. We do not want a hunter who draws such a coveted license to be in competition with a host of hunters harvesting animals of both sexes and all ages to depopulate the herd. Therefore, in preparation for a possible depopulation effort, we would like to reduce the limited draw either-sex license quota from one (1) to 0 so the limited-draw license does not show up in the 2015 regulations book, which goes to print in February. But we do not want to close the season so that a possible depopulation hunt could still take place. The possible licenses for a depopulation hunt would not appear in the 2015 regulations book, but would only be offered when and if the EA is approved, hopefully by mid-summer. Therefore, we would like to keep the either-sex License/Permit Type (LPT) in place and change the acceptable range of licenses from the current 1 to 2, to a range of 0, proposed here, to unlimited to facilitate depopulation should that project go forward. We think it would probably take a couple of years of aggressive harvest to achieve depopulation, and once achieved the season would be closed to make way for restocking sheep. After restocking and once the population grew big enough to support a harvest then the season could re-open with a few limited-draw licenses. It should be understood that if we offer no limited-drawing license in 2015 and issues identified in the EA or other circumstance prevent a depopulation season, then there would be no 2015 bighorn sheep season in HD 315.

**Public Involvement Process & Results:** Because the concept of depopulating a struggling population for subsequent restocking was only recently presented there has been limited discussion with the public to date. The local biologist, the R3 wildlife manager and the game management bureau chief have been in contact with some local sportsmen's groups, the Montana Chapter of the Sheep Foundation, and others about the idea of depopulating the Tendoy Mountains herd for later restocking and there has been general support for the idea. We have not, however, specifically discussed this proposal for reducing the limited draw license quota to 0. Also, in addition to public comment taken at the January 15<sup>th</sup> meeting it will go out for public comment through 5 p.m., Jan. 23, 2015. Final Commission consideration will be taken up at the February meeting.

**Alternatives and Analysis:** If the proposed quota change is not adopted there could be consequences to the hunter possessing the either-sex limited draw license because of other sheep hunters afield if the possible future action of using public hunting to depopulate the Tendoy Mountains bighorn sheep herd for subsequent restocking were to take place.

**Agency Recommendation & Rationale:** FWP recommends that the Commission adopt the proposed quota change in bighorn sheep hunting district 315 as presented by the Department.

**Proposed Motion:** I move to adopt the proposed quota change in bighorn sheep hunting district 315 as presented by the Department.